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ABSTRACT

Teachers of minority handicapped children can enhance their relationship with parents by understanding that parents cannot be forced to participate and that the teacher cannot expect to have the same authority with parents as with children. It is important for teachers to begin parent training programs with high success activities, focus on individual parental needs, identify areas of parent proficiency, and establish criteria for evaluating program success. Parent participation may take the form of such actions as applying teaching procedures in the home with and without the assistance of a teacher and exchanging ideas and teaching skills at informal functions. Procedures for enhancing parental effeciveness begins before the start of school and extends through ongoing discussions, conferences regarding the child's individualized educational program, and workshops in which parents can help construct materials. (CL)

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ENHANCING PARENTAL EFFECTIVENESS

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Introduction

Research has indicated that many minority children's rate of development is deterred by poverty situations. The lack of magazines, books, radios, televisions, stimulating games, toys and activities, positive attitudes towards schools and appropriate role models contribute to the differences between minority and middle class children's developmental patterns.

The differences in the developmental patterns may be eliminated by placing minority children in an enriching school environment. However parents are considered to be more influential in children's development than the school. The quality of the relationships between parents and children play a significant role in the children's self esteem and success in school (Cardenas and Zamora, 1980).

Programs which decrease parents' self esteem hinder their ability to serve as appropriate role models and provide the essential guidance and authority to their children. Therefore parent educators should assist parents, acknowledge the difficulties in child rearing, avoid misleading statements about their capabilities (Hess, 1980), familiarize parents with other professionals which can be of assistance and provide the opportunity to participate in role play (Fantini, 1980).

However, educators which believe parents require expert advice have the tendency to assign parents passive roles which require predetermined answers. This approach is unacceptable to minority parents (Weikart, 1980).

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Furthermore, the distance between the home and school is greater today than ever before. Parents are trying to advance their careers and leaving the instruction of their children to the teachers. While teachers are focusing most of their efforts on teaching, avoiding asking for help from parents because of ill advice, conducting 15 to 20 minute conferences and advising parents to let them do the teaching (Bell, 1980).

As long as most educators continue to overlook parents' importance to the disciplinary team and stereotype them according to the labels utilized to describe their children (Bissell, 1976) and view parents as the etiology of their children's handicaps the rift will remain between the home and school.

The Parents

Parents of exceptional children are perhaps the most concerned, informed and involved members of our society, other than professionals, in their children's organizations which keep abreast of and insist upon new laws and the essential litigation to protect their children's rights. In fact, they are quite adamant in appealing any decision they believe contrary to their children's best interests (Charles and Malian, 1980).

Similar to natural parents, foster parents are extremely interested in enhancing their exceptional children development. Although both groups possess skills and concepts in the care and development of exceptional children, Quick, Little and Campbell (1973) believe their participation in a parent training program might assist them in acquiring additional attitudes and skills required to enhance the development of their children.

However many parents believe they already possess the essential skills required to provide their children with the necessary tools to cope with the world. They often plan activities above their children's level and create an atmosphere of defeat and rejection for their children (Love, 1973).

Therefore in order to avoid maladjustment, family members and others interested in working with exceptional children are advised to consider and base activities on the children's strengths and weaknesses.

Furthermore, one must always remember a parent's difficulty in dealing appropriately with her child's handicap is mirrored in her child's ability to adjust to himself and his environment. Consequently, some authorities suggest that all parents and their children need assistance in understanding the concepts of exceptionality (Love, 1970).

The Teachers

Teachers responsibilities usually include keeping parents informed of their children's progress, exchanging data with parents, assisting parents find solutions to problems their children encounter, conversing with parents in the home, communicating with parents informally, conducting parent conferences, enhancing parental effectiveness through workshops, monitoring parent interaction in the classroom and participating with Parent Policy Boards.

Although many of them are not equipped to be parent educators or counselors, they are in the best position to serve parents. Therefore they are also required to develop long range plans for parent programs, conduct interviews with parents, provide parents with guidance, work with small and large groups of parents, evaluate and keep records of parents meetings, familiarize themselves with professionals or agencies which provide parents with assistance, introduce and refer these resources to parents in a non-threatening manner and develop techniques with parents to modify children's behavior.

Consequently, teachers must consider the following facts in order to establish good parent-teacher relationships: (1) their authority over children in the classroom diminishes when working with parents; (2) parents and children differ in age, stature and character; (3) there is a degree of equality between

parents and teachers; (4) parents cannot be forced to conduct or participate in an activity and (5) teachers must acquire the ability to modify parents behavior.

They must also remember the behavior exhibited by parents often reflect their past school experiences. Many of them are flooded with good or bad memories as soon as they enter the building. Thus it is essential for teachers and other school personnel to be as unintimidating as possible.

Sometimes teachers are intimidated by the thought of working with parents. Their loss of classroom authority and unfriendly and domineering attitudes of parents intensifies their feelings of insecurity. If they began parent training programs with high success activities, utilize the assistance of other school personnel to obtain skills to train parents and incorporate additional activities gradually into the program, they will diminish their feelings of insecurity as well as provide adequate services to parents (Spodek, 1972).

Teachers may provide adequate services to parents if they focus on the individual or common needs of the parents. They cannot develop individualized activities for parents until they consider the specific parental behaviors which effect the development of exceptional children and measure the parents' proficiency in each area.

Parents proficiency in each area of concern may be identified by teachers if they utilize formal and informal assessment tools. Formal assessment, often accomplished through tests, is the most unbiased method utilized to determine parents' proficiency in specific areas. While conversing with parents and noting their reactions (informal assessment) is another means of disclosing parents strengths and weaknesses in specific areas and reaffirming the results gathered through formal assessment.

Commerical publishers or private sources will provide teachers with the essential tools to determine parents concepts of and reactions to exceptionality,

human development, childcare and working with their children in the home. Teachers should also be aware that the information gathers supplied by these firms are in the form of a test except for the rating scales utilized by members of the staff to evaluate the child's home environment and the parents' ability to work with the child in the home.

It is also essential to determine the method of evaluating the parents and training program prior to the actual training of the parents. The criteria for rating success and evaluation periods should be established and method utilized to assess the parents should be followed during the evaluation. A comparison of the test results will determine if the criterion levels for the parents and program were obtained; strengths and weaknesses of the parents and techniques utilized by the teachers in a specific area require modification (Quick, Little and Campbell, 1973).

Afterwards, the teachers may begin the training program by allowing the parents to participate in the following activities: (1) discussing and questioning the procedures utilized by a specialist working with their children; (2) applying observed teaching procedures in the home with and without the assistance of the teacher; (3) viewing and improving the deficits observed on a videotape of themselves; (4) participating in conferences; (5) exchanging ideas and teaching skills at informal functions, i.e. family parties and picnics with other parents and (6) attending meetings of special interest.

Finally the responsibility of the teacher is to keep abreast of the progress of the program by noting the changes in the parents' attitudes and teaching techniques, concepts of child rearing, children's performance in school (sometimes unreliable) and responses to teacher's training techniques and presentations (Quick, Little and Campbell, 1973).

Procedures for Enhancing Parental Effectiveness

Enhancing parental effectiveness begins several weeks before the first day of school. It is incorporated into the tentative goals and plans one develops to ensure a successful year for her future students.

Since parents play a key role in their children's development one must consider the best way to utilize such a valuable asset. Before attempting to solve this problem, consider the following questions: (1) What are my goals for my students? (2) How will their parents attidues, beliefs and knowledge of exceptionality, human development and child care practices effect the obtainment of these goals? (3) What do I think parents should know in order to fulfill their roles to the fullest capacity? (4) How can I help them? and (5) Do they need assistance? As on can see this is the exact time to examine and familiarize oneself with the information on formal parental assessment tools and develop goals for her parents. Therefore during the initial contact, i.e. phone calls, letters or visits one can began denoting the parents strengths and weaknesses in relation to your goals.

The first day of school is as equally important as the planning period. Informal conversations with the children and parents will increase and clarify the information obtained during the initial contact.

Continuous discussions with parents and assessment of your students during the next few weeks will provide additional information to strengthen the parents training program.

After careful analysis of your children's needs, call in the parents for a conference and plan strategies (develop Individualized Education Programs) with the parents to enhance their children's development. Developing an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is the most valuable time to formulate additonal opinions about the strengths and needs of parents in regard to their children's development.

This transaction often takes two to three hours long and many topics and questions concerning, exceptionality, human development, home environment and child care practices and other points of interest have been discussed thoroughly. Utilize this time also to praise parents for the accomplishments they have made with their children, remind them about the Make and Take Workshop you are planning in the near future and discover the hour and day of the week that is convenient for them to participate in the workshop.

Next select three areas of development to center your workshop around. Prepare a type or printed sheet of the children's strengths and needs in those areas in individual folders. Partially design and label with children's names three games (one per area) based on the children's strengths and needs and acquaint your assistants with the purpose and formation of each game.

The arrangement of the children's folders, games and art materials is extremely important. Proper arrangement will give one further opportunity to fulfill one of the goals for parent training programs - parent interaction.

Parent interaction provides parents with the opportunity to share their views, philosophies and attitudes on exceptionality and child care practices and discover other parents have similar problems and attitudes about their children. Therefore prior to the workshop, place the games, art materials and children's folders with similar skills on the same table or separate desks in the same circle.

The night of the workshop greet each parent at the door, give them their children's folder, remind them the games they are going to make are based on the information inside the folder, answer parents' questions and request the assistants to escort them to their places and fulfill refreshment (punch and cookies) requests.

Begin the workshop by expressing appreciation for the parents attendance and concern for their children's education and your desire for their pleasure in the construction of the games.

Converse and make games with each set of parents in order to reinforce parent - teacher relationships, share ideas concerning the development of their children, explain usage of games and obtain topics of interest to the parents.

Following the construction of the games give each parent the opportunity to complete evaluation forms. The answers to the following questions on the evaluation forms will provide additional information required to ensure the success of future workshops in the parent training program: (1) Did you enjoy making the games? (2) Were there too many or few games to make? (3) Was the workshop too long or short? (4) How many times a year would you like to come to a workshop? (5) Do you think you and your child will enjoy playing these games? and (6) Comments?

Gradually incorporate the completion of questions from formal assessment tools which remain unanswered and the participation of other staff members into the workshop.

After enough knowledge has been acquired to adequately assess the parents, review goals and objectives to make sure they meet the individual needs of the parents and children, develop the criterion for measuring the success of the parents and training programs, determine the procedures for monitoring the progress of the parents and establish dates of evaluation for the parents and training program. Following this format and including special activities requested by parents will definitely ensure the success of future workshops and enhance the learning of exceptional children.

Conclusion

Placing children in an school environment conducive to their learning and increasing parental effectiveness may eliminate the differences in the developmental patterns of minority and middle class children. Therefore it is essential for their teachers to design activities based on the specific needs and interests of parents in their parent training programs.

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